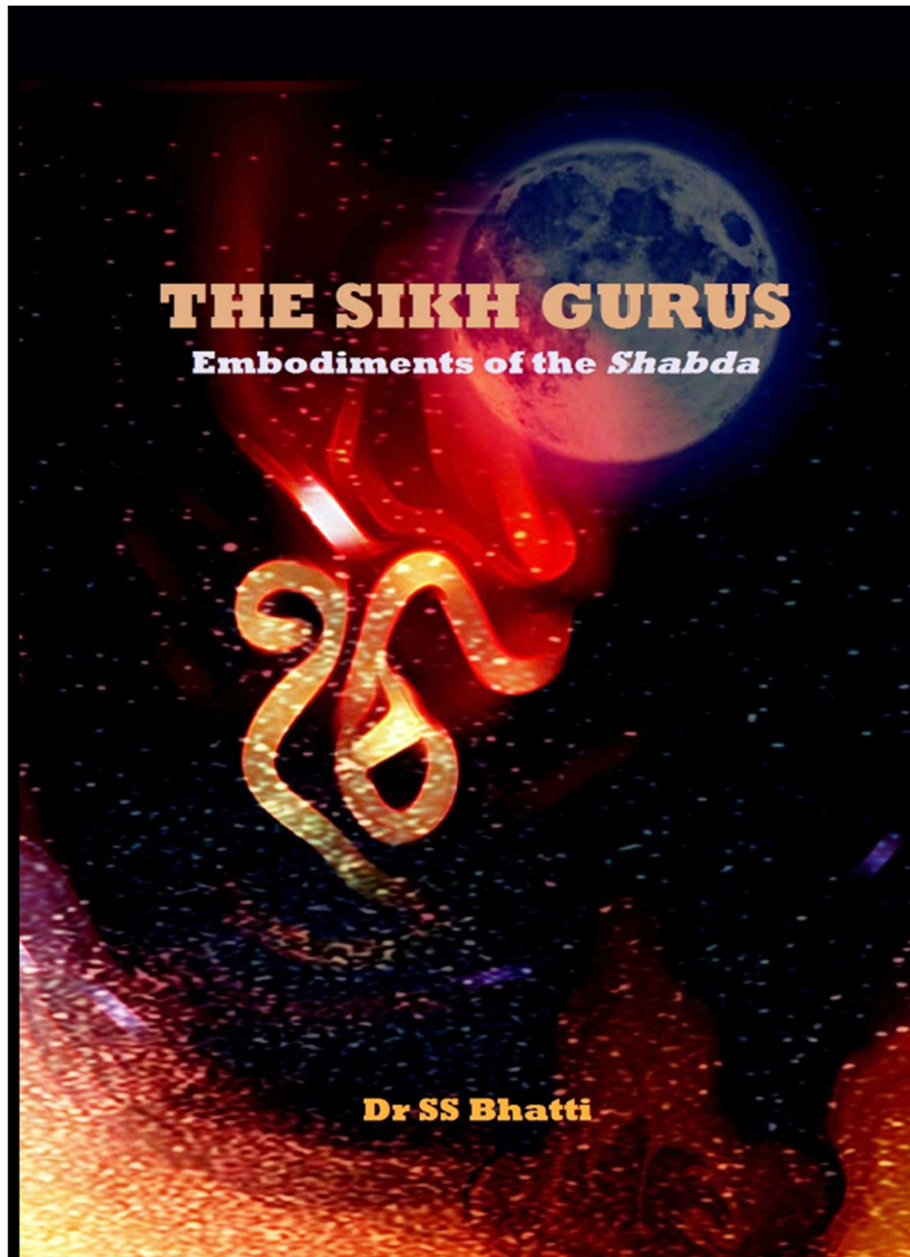
Title of Book: **THE SIKH GURUS: Embodiments of the Shabda**
Authored by: **Dr Surendra Singh Bhatti**, Chandigarh
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Dr Surendra Singh Bhatti is a versatile genius, whom I called a "*Holistic Scholar*" and "*Creativity Incarnate*" in my earlier reviews. Chandigarh Newsline of Indian Express has nicknamed him "*Chandigarh's Mr Versatility*" based on his professional competence in 55

disciplines, including Art, Music, Poetry, Painting, Aesthetics, Comparative Religion, Mysticism, Musicology, Philosophy, Sociology, Geography, Planning, Creative Writing, and so forth. By training, Dr Bhatti is a professional architect, who retired as Principal of Chandigarh College of Architecture. How he got expertise and recognition in other disciplines is a trade secret of Dr Bhatti, which makes him a versatile genius.

The Sikh Gurus: Embodiments of the Shabda is a *magnum opus* of the author. I reviewed his earlier books on Sikh religion and call them "Rivers of Creativity". But this volume on the Sikh Gurus defies all definitions and I may call it an "Ocean of Creativity". At 85, Dr Bhatti has compiled it as a monumental work which includes, in abstract form, all information available about Sikh Gurus in *Janam Sakhis* (hagiographical accounts), Sikh history, Theology, *and Gurbani.* In my view, after Bhai Vir Singh and Prof. Puran Singh, he is the next trailblazer in the Sikh world to project Sikhi and Sikh ethos at the global level.

This volume consists of three Sections: Section I covers "Biographical Notes on Sikh Gurus"; Section II consists of miscellaneous essays as "Support Material" to Section I; and Section III is "Poetic Rendering" of Gurbani. I feel myself handicapped to review this in one piece; hence my review is based on Section I and some selected essays from Section II. In the Prologue, the author gives full credit to his father, Balwant Singh Bhatti, for his early psycho-spiritual orientation and later to his training in Architecture which enabled him to have a holistic view of human existence. He writes about his mission and motivation: "*This book carries the fragrance of what I have personally experienced in the serious and sustained study of the beauty and bounty of the Sikh Faith that sets it apart as Pragmatic Spirituality embodied in Guru Nanak's Creative Mysticism. Both terms are my coinages: Creative Mysticism, and Pragmatic Spirituality".*

The gist of this volume is given in the Prologue. The author pays the highest tribute to Guru Nanak: "Guru Nanak stands apart in a class all his own because he is the one and only one World Prophet who succeeded in expressing as well conveying [via 'Creative' means] the joyous wonder that he had experienced as sustained bliss [in Mysticism]. He has called it *Naam-Khumaari Nanaka Charhi Rahey Din Raat* [Nanak, the inebriation that God's Holy Name provides sustains its kick through night and day as undiminished euphoria]". Dr Bhatti justifies the sub-title of his book as follows: "The Sikh Faith has Ten *Masters*, *not* **human** *Gurus*, because *Shabda* is the only **Guru** in this distinguished religion. Just the same these rare humans by the Grace of God are the most authentic exemplars as *Embodiments of the Shabda.* I must say that *Shabda* is *not* an ordinary word coined during the torpor of dailiness. It is a priceless word received in Revelation directly from God sanctified by divinity. Guru Nanak has used the epithet '*NAAM*' to encompass the inviolable sovereignty of the Laws of the Universe as well as the pious power of the Holy Name (of Lord God)".

The author goes on to elaborate the power and beauty of *Shabda*: "A vast majority of peoples of the world would look askance at the Sikh Faith's claim that *Shabda* embodies incredible powers that no scientific instrument or philosophy can ever decipher much less measure. Interestingly, the knowledge necessary to use *Shabda* cannot be acquired in schools, colleges, and universities where they only teach you many skills of an amazing diversity beginning with the simplest to the most sophisticated. Knowledge of *Shabda* that comes from inner awakening is out of bounds for the worldly wise and the formally educated smart guys!"

Section I opens with the longest and most comprehensive write up: "**Guru Nanak Dev: World's Greatest Prophet**". The author devotes 65 pages to cover all the events of Guru Nanak's life, his teachings, odysseys called *Udasis*, his philosophy of Oneness and his Revelations. In my view, no other Sikh writer has interpreted the message of Guru Nanak so brilliantly as Dr. Bhatti. In his own words, he describes, "*I have put my poetic rendering in English of a selection of Gurbani done at different times over a few years as a result of afflatus that had dawned upon me by God's grace"*. I am a firm believer in the mystique of his afflatus which I also felt while swimming through his narrative of the Sikh Gurus. I can vouchsafe that any dedicated Sikh of Guru Nanak will be transported to a realm of wonder after reading this essay.

The beauty of Dr Bhatti's narrative is its simplicity, originality, and precision. He sums up Guru Nanak's teachings: "*There is only one God without a second—omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient—and that all human beings can have direct access to Him with no need of getting into the rigmarole of rituals, and without the intervention of priests. His most radical social exhortations denounced the caste system and taught that everyone is equal, regardless of caste, creed, gender, nationality, cultural prejudices, nationality, and ethnic eccentricities. Some of the significant values that Guru Nanak instilled in his followers veered round his triune formula of "Kirat Karo; Vand Chhako; and Naam Japo"*.

The author further elaborates the implications of Guru's revolutionary message: "Guru Nanak is the first prophet who presented and propagated a cosmic view of life—piecing together the political, social, and metaphysical imperatives of workaday existence into what I call Pragmatic Spirituality that encompasses the terrestrial and the celestial, the mundane and the exalted, serving it on a platter to the low and weak. He transformed his Revelation into a comprehensible *mantra* in the common folks' language for ideal living through "Earn thy living through honest means; share it with the less privileged; and meditate on God's Holy Name". Dr Bhatti is dead sure that Guru Nanak received the Message of God by His grace through Revelation. His *Bani* is thus soul-resurrecting and consciousness-exalting utterance sprung from artesian wells of direct knowledge within his being that comes only from actual seeing, never by speculation and ratiocinative cerebration. Dr Bhatti also makes a distinction

between Guru Nanak's God and Vedantic Brahman: "*Guru Nanak thus describes God as Primal Person [not an abstract principle of truth as the 'Brahman' of the Vedas] both in His Nirguna [without attributes] and Sarguna [with attributes] Being*".

Dr Bhatti is a proud connoisseur of Sikh Spirituality calling it **Pragmatic Spirituality**: "Guru Nanak ushered an all-inclusive higher order of civilisation containing a complete set of moral and spiritual guidelines for shouldering religious, social and political responsibilities so that even the masses could lead a holistic life. His was a bloodless Revolution that sought to demolish the hegemony as much of the Brahmanical priest craft as of the tyranny of the feudal lords. He sought to create an equal and just society for the downtrodden, humble, and the weak. Throughout his life Guru Nanak taught the virtues of equality and dignity to all humankind irrespective of their perverted practices, caste structures, gender biases, social maladies, and geo-political affiliations and unending conflicts. In sharp contrast to the centuries-old customs and practices he accorded women equal status in society. Pragmatic Spirituality as the directive principle of workaday existence is Guru Nanak's priceless gift to all Humanity".

Pragmatic Spirituality of Guru Nanak proved to be an elixir of life and panacea for curing ills of Indian society: "Guru Nanak, the greatest Prophet of the World, was painfully aware of how men in power exploited the meek and the hapless to turn them into eternal slaves in order to stay as their beneficent rulers. They used everything—muscle power, mental power, power of caste, creed, social status, learning, political clout and what have you—to achieve the one-point agendum of making people their slaves *en masse*. Guru Nanak's genius lay in that he could present the most abstruse and abstract ideas in simple and concrete terms in the language of the masses so that they take full charge of their lives as God's greatest gift".

The author is well versed with modern scientific theories of origin of Universe and evolution of life. He displays the correct use of scientific concepts throughout this volume. He establishes that the Sikh tradition was liberated from Sanskrit, the language of priestly class, and the Vedic lore by Guru Angad Dev by adopting Punjabi, the language of the common people. Guru Angad underscored the simplicity and accessibility of Sikh Faith's tenets, and consolidated the idea that it was based on Guru Nanak's Revelation and was a distinct religion, *not* a rehashing of the prevalent Hinduism and Islam which were always at daggers drawn.

The author further brings out the unique character of Sikh religion: "*I can vouch that the Sikh Faith in the only religion so far based on Revelation of its founder [Guru Nanak] who himself has recorded this fact in his own hand unlike the Holy Books of other religions that were written by the followers after the death of their founders. Anyone in doubt of the verity of my averment must examine firsthand the mind-boggling description that Guru Nanak has given of what we call cosmology and cosmogony*". In my view, no other religious scripture has

compatible scientific ideas on Cosmology as in the Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib, enunciated by Guru Nanak in Raaga Maru Sohle.

The author has eulogised the contribution of Guru Angad Dev to carry on the mission of Guru Nanak: "Guru Angad was at once a spiritual teacher and a man of action. To him, religion was not only a spiritual experience but a way of life in which every action must have ingredients of spirituality, humility, and love. This can be achieved only when one is always conscious of the presence of God. He thus insisted that there should be harmony between thought, word, and deed at once subsumed in the purity of life".

The author has described the social and religious reforms brought out by 3rd Master, Guru Amar Das during his ministry. Guru Jee established 22 preaching centres, called *Manjis*, in India to preach Sikh religion in Punjab and other far-flung areas. Institution of *Sangat, Pangat* and *Langar* (free kitchen) was given primacy. No visitor, howsoever high his status, was allowed to meet the Guru unless he partook *langar* sitting with the common folk in a *pangat* (sitting in a row on flour). The Hindu custom of *Sati* and *Purdah* was abolished by the Guru. Widow marriage was encouraged and allowed against the Hindu tradition. Hindu rituals were either abolished or modified for his Sikh followers: "The Guru redefined life as priceless gift of God by stressing that rituals and rites associated with death were meaningless and, therefore, singing paeans to Lord God's glory was the only valid ceremony worth performing to guide the departed soul to its destination".

Guru Ram Das, the 4th Master of Sikh faith, was a great town planner who laid the foundation of Ramdas Pur (the present-day Amritsar). He began the exercise with the digging up of the water pool by enlarging an existing waterbody. The Guru invited and helped settle traders and craftsmen from fifty-two different professions, leading to its rapid growth, so much so that in due course of time the town became the largest commercial centre in the north- western region of the Indian sub-continent. Guru Ram Das also introduced a new and distinct code and ceremony for solemnising Sikh marriages by the reading and singing of *Laavaan* [Sikh marriage ceremony with four circumambulations round *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*]. To make a distinction between tenets of Sikh faith and Hindu faith, Guru Jee prescribed that the person who calls himself a Sikh of the True Guru must observe the following daily routine of life:

One who calls himself, A Sikh of the True Guru,
Shall get up early morning and Meditate on God's Holy Name.
Bathe daily in the ambrosial pool, Obey the Guru's instructions,
Chant Lord God's Name, thus all sins and misdeed,
Shall be erased from his life.

Dr. Bhatti has called Guru Arjan Dev, *a Spiritual Symbiosis of Thought, Word and Deed*. His spiritual resplendence glowed forth from his Naam-illuminated humility. Guru Arjan collected *Bani* of all his predecessor Gurus and compiled it into a sacred Scripture of the Sikh faith, called Sri Guru Granth Sahib, in present times. The Sikh Scripture includes *Bani* (revealed utterances) of 6 Sikh Gurus, 15 Bhagats of other Indian traditions, including Hindus and Muslims, 11 Bhatts and 4 other devoted Sikhs. Its message has universal appeal as it is meant for whole humanity without any distinction of caste, creed, gender, and religion. The author pays his glowing tributes to 5th Guru: "I experience a strange delight in contemplating the spiritual symbiosis between Guru Arjan Dev's inspired *Bani* and his inspiring Life. Both are palpably charged with the incredible power of humility which can melt even the most obdurate of human beings". Guru Arjan Dev laid the foundation of Sikh faith as a distinct religion by completing two grand projects: construction of the holy Sikh Temple, Harmandir Sahib (modern day Golden Temple) that must serve as the centre of its devotion, and the Holy Scripture which must enshrine the timeless spirit of its divine message. Guru Arjan suffered martyrdom on 30 May 1606 in Lahore on the orders of Jehangir, the Mughal ruler of India. This martyrdom changed the peace-loving Sikh faith into an organisation of Saint-Soldiers dedicated to defending their life and freedom.

The author has done full justice to accounts of life and achievements of other five Gurus, namely, Har Gobind, Har Rai, Har Krishan, Teg Bahadur and Guru Gobind Singh, who followed Guru Arjan. All Sikh Gurus imbibed the spirit (*Jot*) of Guru Nanak and carried on the flame of Sikhi despite constant struggle against the State, represented by ruling elites, the Mughals, and their cohorts, including Hindu rajas. The creation of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh on Baisakhi of 1699 has been described by the author as a climax in the history of Sikh faith. According to Dr Bhatti, "*Guru Gobind Singh sought to establish (and succeeded in doing so) two basic principles: (1) universal brotherhood without any distinction, and (2) the spirit of self-sacrifice for others without demur. It was crystal clear to him that "The feeling of brotherhood can only dawn after the annihilation of all (man-made) artificial barriers between man and man. The baneful caste-system introduced by Manu and followed with a vengeance by the Brahmin had to be nullified*."

To finish this review, I leapfrog to Section II of this volume, written under the title "Miscellany of Support Material" to augment the narrative of Section I. This Section has two dozen essays of historical importance, including Zafar Nama, Golden Temple, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Religion, Science and the Universe. Some essays are devoted to prominent Sikh personalities of Guru era, for example, Bhai Gurdas, Bhai Buddha, Baba Sri Chand, Bhai Nand Lal Goya,

and Bhai Ghanaiya. I have read most of these essays to savour the beauty of Dr Bhatti's narrative.

"Golden Temple: The Marvel of Sikh Architecture" is a brilliant essay based on author's 3rd Ph.D. Thesis. Dr Bhatti's description of Golden Temple architecture is based on sublime ideas of divinity and humility of Sikh Faith: "*In the Building Design of Sri Harmandar Sahib, the Spirit of Architecture has been caught in a billowing breath of devotion, in total surrender to God, Who in His own sweet Will, joyously filled the architect's heart, completely cleansed of egotism, as a worthy receptacle of His Grace. This architecture is thus a Religion of Feeling concretised in the elements of Space, Structure, and Form—at once Universal and Timeless, like God's Own Immanent Divine Creativity: An Architecture in which Religion dwells as a Living Force to reunite souls, wandering on the wasteland of Maya (illusion), with the Logos or God's Word (Shabda)".*

On my bidding, Dr Bhatti wrote two essays: "God in Sri Guru Granth Sahib" and "Religion, Science and the Universe". Both are included in this volume and carry the stamp of his genius. He laments on the attitude of Scientists who believe in Big Bang Singularity: "*It is ironical that Scientists accept this hypothesis but shy away from Guru Nanak's mystical 'Singularity' that he proclaims by attaching the Numeral '1' to God's name by which he begins to share his Revelation: Ik Oankar."* He offers a sane solution to resolve dichotomy between Science and Religion: "It is high time that Scientists become 'Saintists' and Religionists transform themselves into 'Reasonalists' so that all people inhabiting the globe find ready peace becoming of the *Homo sapiens* that means 'Man, the wise'. I agree with his cryptic remark: "Both the Religionist and the Scientist suffer from Blind Faith. The former believes in the omniscience of Religion to show the way to our ultimate destination through the dark corridors of Time that run through unchartered terrains of Space. The latter believes in the omnipotence of Science to solve all imaginable problems to the benefit of all and sundry. However, nothing of this kind has so far happened in either case".

The author wants to project the intrinsic nature of Gurbani as a unique phenomenon: "*Gurbani is none of these things: philosophy, poetry, mythology, and mysticism as commonly understood*", and then goes on to define the purpose of each area of study. I am amazed at his depth of comprehension of scientific concepts and their use in religious discourses discussed under the heading: "Comments on Established Scientific Terminology Popularly used in Religious Discourses". He concludes this topic placing Guru Nanak ahead of Einstein: "*Einstein struggled all his life developing a TOE (Theory of Everything) but failed. However,*

Gurbani already has one: It says that NAAM is the mainstay of everything that exists—living beings, stars, galaxies, and what have you".

Dr Bhatti is well versed with the domains of Science and Religion: "Religion and Science are two major tools of apprehending the Universe which in India was classified centuries ago into two categories: the Inner World of Mind, and the Outer World of Matter. These two are respectively referred to as the Subjective World and the Objective World. Based on the assumption, not yet refuted, human life consists of Body, Mind, and Soul. By its very nature and scope, **Religion** based on faith is associated with the Inner World whose worth can be validated only by **Experience** that narrowly belongs to an individual human person. In sharp contradistinction, **Science** deals with the Outer World by observation, hypothesis, measurements, and lab **Experiment** whose success makes it universal and accessible to all human beings".

Section III "Poetic Rendering" is a marvellous section added to this volume. It has some random selection of miscellaneous *Shabads* from Gurbani of SGGS and Dasam Granth. As a preface to poetic rendering of Japuji, author writes: "Interestingly, translation prods me on to explore the languages concerned and delve beneath their obvious differences down to their cultural and artistic nuances steeped in cosmic correspondences. Such a self-assigned task has been deepening my understanding of the Sacred Word when the subject happens to be Religion, Spirituality, and Mysticism". A special feature of this section is addition of his paintings by the author to communicate the message of the holy *Shabad*.

The book under review is an epitome to erudite scholarship of Dr Surendra Singh Bhatti, the celebrated author. It is a creation of White Falcon Publishing as a monumental work of author fully illustrated by artwork and paintings in colour. The text is interspersed with Gurbani quotes from Sri Guru Granth Sahib to bring home the truth of Sikhi as a distinct religion. The author has given his own translation of Gurbani without any recourse to the popular version of Sant Singh Khalsa MD, available on internet and *srigranth.org* created by Dr K.S. Thind of USA.

As a reviewer, I consider it my duty to point out some minor discrepancies in the book under review. On page 77, under Piri heading, the author wrongly ascribes the Gurbani quote to Guru Amar Das. It is Guru Ram Das who prescribes the daily routine for Sikhs in his *Bani*, not Guru Amar Das. On page 24, author refers to an inscription on Guru Nanak's memorial in Istanbul, Turkey. This fake news was spread by Dr D.S. Chahal of Montreal, a renowned Sikh Scientist and Scholar, as his discovery but later he revised his views in 2007. It happened due to

misinterpretation of the text of the inscription on the monument. In the essay, "Quintessence of Sikh Gurus' Contributions", there is a lot of repetition of text from Section I, "Biographical Notes". The author needs to adopt a standard system of reference to quote Gurbani *Shabads* and other citations in the text.

I must congratulate the author for bringing out this encyclopaedic work on Sikh Gurus. It will be a useful REFERENCE source for scholars of Sikh Studies worldwide. It has a matchless beauty of narrative written in flawless English. It will cater to the needs of all age groups. The hagiographic stories of Gurus' life translated from *Janam Sakhi* genre (tradition) in Punjabi language have mesmerising effect. They touch the core of heart of the seeker for truth, lifting him from the physical plane to celestial realms, where he can resonate with the message of the ONENESS of Sikh Gurus, assimilated in Guru Nanak's IKONKAR.